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ABSTRACT

Typical characteristics of program reviews, illustrations of to whom the reviews relate in a university setting, and conditions and expectations that may enhance the use of the results of program reviews are described in this report. It is argued that program reviews do not serve all levels of a university equally: the primary beneficiaries of the review are the faculty and chairperson of the unit, while the central administration benefits the least. It is explained that program reviews will be utilized most in an administrative climate that emphasizes openness and collaboration and in situations where the program review serves the particular information needs and issues of concern to the user. Realistic expectations as to the usefulness of reviews is another aspect to be considered in the design and implementation stages of the review. (Author/PHR)

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PROGRAM REVIEW AND EVALUATION:

INTEGRATING RESULTS INTO DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

PROGRAM REVIEW AND EVALUATION:

INTEGRATING RESULTS INTO DECISION MAKING

The results of recent studies of systems of academic program review allow observations to be made on how those reviews are used in decision making. This paper describes some typical characteristics of program reviews, illustrates to whom the reviews relate in the university setting, and outlines some appropriate conditions and expectations that may enhance the use of results of program reviews. It is argued that program reviews do not serve all constituents equally. The unit reviewed benefits most, and the central administration least. Furthermore, program reviews will be utilized most in an administrative climate that emphasizes openness and collaboration and in situations where the program review serves the particular information needs and issues of concern of the user.

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PROGRAM REVIEW AND EVALUATION:
INTEGRATING RESULTS INTO DECISION-MAKING

Academic departments and programs have always been reviewed in some fashion. But comprehensive, systematic efforts to conduct academic program reviews are a recent development in higher education. Only during the past few years has experience accumulated on review systems to the point where useful observations can be made on how the results are used in decision making. This paper reviews some typical characteristics of program review activities, illustrates to whom the reviews relate in the university setting, and outlines some appropriate conditions and expectations that may enhance the use of the results of program reviews. The observations are based on a recent study of planning and evaluation activities in several large universities.[1] This study addressed the general question: "Do planning and evaluation techniques make a difference in university operations, and if so, who in the university and what activities are affected?"

For the purposes of this paper a program review activity consists of a cycle of interdependent stages: a needs assessment stage, a design and implementation stage, a utilization stage, and an analysis and review stage that contributes to adjusted needs and a refined design.[2] The impacts of program review activities are not clearly separable from the earlier stages in the cycle, for the institutional climate, a part of needs assessment, and the choice of questions included in the design

of a review are two major factors that influence the success of program reviews. However, if the interdependencies of all stages in the cycle are recognized, then the match between the questions addressed, who in the organization is concerned with those questions, and the probable impacts can be discussed.

Two themes dominate the observations on the use and impacts of program reviews. First, program reviews do not serve all constituents equally, and they are not all used equally. Second, the administrative climate in the university determines the use of program reviews to the same, if not greater degree than it affects the assessment of needs and the design of the process.

Characteristics of Program Reviews

Characteristics of program review activities that are important for understanding the use of the reviews are outlined in Table 1. It is convenient to divide these features into two classes, those that relate to the review of a single unit, and those that relate to the continuing system of unit reviews.

The product of a single program review typically assembles qualitative and quantitative information from many sources regarding the unit. The data is used to describe the unit as a separate entity within the university and its role and relationships to other units in the university. An individual unit report typically describes unit goals and aspirations, assesses performance with respect to those goals, and analyzes problems. It also deals with operational and managerial practices in the unit and changing trends in the discipline. The review process is usually intense, broadly participatory, penetrating, occasionally controversial, and a lot of work. The

TABLE 1

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAM REVIEW

DUAL NATURE OF REVIEWS	Single unit review.	Systematic cycle of reviews.
PURPOSES	Program/unit improvement. Change agent. Unit problem solving mechanism.	General program directions and planning. Resource allocation. Accountability
ORGANIZATIONAL FOCUS	Single unit or program.	Total organization over the system of reviews.
TIME ORIENTATION OF PERSPECTIVES	Both retrospective and prospective during the one year review process.	Cumulative over 5-7 year cycle.
PROCESS FLEXIBILITY	Adjustable to each unit situation.	Evolving design of process.
NATURE OF ISSUES ADDRESSED	Goals and priorities. Performance assessment. Operational and managerial practices. Trends in the discipline.	University academic policies. Resource allocation procedures. Longer-range program needs. Overall unit quality.

time orientation of a single review is both retrospective and prospective with trends usually projected at least as far as the next scheduled review. Each review normally begins from a common framework that is adjusted to meet unique features of individual situations.

In contrast to single unit reviews, larger aggregations of the organization become the focus of the review activity only after a large portion of the system of unit reviews has been completed. Over the typical five to seven year period of reviews, perspectives accumulate across these reviews that begin to address university-wide policies and procedures in ways that give issues much different weight than when they appear in a single situation. In addition, the overall design of the review process evolves as experience accumulates, and better means are developed to elicit information that can serve the needs of the unit being reviewed, the school or collegiate division, and the university administration.

Nature of Impacts of Program Reviews

The primary benefit of a program review process is the opportunity that it provides for structured introspection where information is collected, assembled, analyzed, and communicated in ways that do not normally take place through the standard practices of most operating units. Much of the information collected is not necessarily new. The primary value lies in the assembly of diverse information at one point, in one place, reviewed by parties in different locations in the institution, and subjected to a series of well structured questions which form the heart of the program review process. Issues and problem areas that are highlighted in the review are seldom new, for most of them are

previously known to insiders and other informed people. But the analysis, clarification, and communication of these issues and the recommendations provided by program reviews influence the decision making process at all levels in the organization by contributing to the legitimate and credible basis upon which actions can be taken. The participation of several constituents in the formulation of recommendations also contributes to the broader basis of support upon which a department chairperson or a dean may act. Recommendations typically reinforce the inclinations of deans, chairpersons, and faculty. Program reviews serve more to precipitate previously recognized actions rather than discover needed actions. As program reviews contribute to the awareness and understanding of problems, actions are precipitated sooner than might otherwise be the case.

However, seldom are dramatic actions taken that can be linked directly to the recommendations of one or even several program reviews. Program reviews add more information to other existing information that helps reduce the unknowns and uncertainty associated with difficult decisions. Hence, decisions are facilitated, but program development and change will continue to be slow and evolutionary, and the links between program reviews and program development will continue to be diffuse and often obscure. Patton (1978). Nevertheless, the contributions are perceived to be helpful to many constituents in the university.

The perceived utility of information provided by program reviews and the kinds of actions that are influenced by the program review process are different for the department or program, the school or college, and the central administration as illustrated in Table 2. At the unit level both qualitative and quantitave data are assembled in

TABLE 2

TYPICAL IMPACTS OF PROGRAM REVIEWS

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL	RELATIVE UTILITY	NATURE OF CHANGES
Unit reviewed (e.g. department or program)	Greatest Utility (primarily from single reviews)	Increased introspection. Revised objectives for teaching & research Better organized qualitative and quantitative information. Clarified unit/program goals, strengths, and deficiencies. Improved unit procedures. Improved contact among unit members. Improved rationale for resources. Potentially increased frustrations.
School/College	Moderate Utility	Improved information on unit trends and priorities, strengths, and weaknesses. Better indications of unit quality and responsiveness. Adjusted college policies and procedures. Adjusted resource decisions (occasional). Adjusted organizational structures (occasional).
University Administration	Least Utility (requires accumulation of reviews)	Revised institutional policies and procedures. Major organizational changes (rare). Major budgetary commitments or cuts (rare).

new ways so that unit goals tend to be clarified, a better basis is developed for new faculty positions, issues of concern are clarified, and priorities may be addressed. Problem areas are more readily recognized and accepted, and they tend to be approached in a more rational and less emotional manner. The program review experience typically leads to adjustments in program content and unit procedures that are often made by the members of the unit even before the review process is completed.

At the college level, the information assembled supplements the existing knowledge of college staff, and adds new elements such as changing trends in the discipline. Momentum can build for the review of policies and practices within the school or college. Issues arising in one unit can often be projected to similar units that have not yet undergone review. The results of program reviews can be used by academic deans to adjust resources and influence the allocation of faculty positions. Program reviews can lead to collegiate level organizational adjustments particularly regarding interdisciplinary programs that typically do not have clear organizational locations.

The information provided through program reviews serves central administrative needs by providing new knowledge of the quality of the unit and its directions and priorities. Changing priorities can be observed through the program review process. Academic deans and central staff can observe the health and vitality of an academic unit through the way the unit responds to the process and the recommendations of the program review. Central administration also benefits from the qualitative information that is provided through program review, for the uniqueness of individual departments is often lost as data is collected,

aggregated, and averaged for use in making general policy and gross allocation decisions. University policies and procedures may be addressed as evidence is collected across several program reviews, for problems that may have been viewed as minor in the context of a single unit may be much larger in scope as similar concerns appear across several reviews. Major organizational rearrangements made by central administration are rare. Furthermore, operating units are seldom eliminated. Changes of this nature usually occur in situations already known to have major problems, and the program review may be the triggering mechanism more than the primary assessment process. But a program review is seldom a sufficient condition to generate major organizational changes, for many other interest groups are usually affected that do not rely or have any interest in the results of a program review. A program review may contribute to decisions for reducing or phasing out activities, but recommendations for improved support of departmental programs are more common.

Supportive recommendations developed through the program review process also have the potential for producing acute frustrations on the part of faculty participants in the review process. The high level of effort required to conduct a program review coupled with the justified recommendations for unit support tend to raise expectations for the acquisition of resources. Since resources are limited, not all justified causes can be rewarded, and considerable frustration is experienced. Since decisions on the allocation of resources normally are made at levels above that of the academic department, decisions are perceived as becoming more centralized, and consequently are resented. Participation by those having altruistic intentions can be adversely affected by the limited reasources available for rewarding significant contributions.

Although all levels of the university can benefit from program review, the primary beneficiaries are the faculty and chairperson of the unit. The central administration benefits the least. This observation is based on the differences between the nature of concerns that people have at different levels in the organization and the kinds of information provided by the program review. For example the faculty member and department chairperson are concerned with the quality, balance, and trends in the activities and programs of the unit, with the relatively detailed operations and management of the unit, and with the requisition of resources to support the unit. In contrast a person working in central administration typically deals with many if not all operating units of the university, deals largely with aggregate information that can display general trends in the university rather than detailed qualitative insights of a particular unit, and is concerned most with general policy questions and the distribution of the resources of the university. Single program reviews address the former, not the latter. Consequently, a central administrator may find program review products useful, but seldom do they become an integral part of their day-to-day activities.

It is the accumulation of program reviews from which patterns emerge that relate to collegiate and general university policies and institutional planning. However, the system of program reviews typically does not link to annual budget cycles. Given the long period of the review cycle, reviews grow obsolete in comparison to current reviews, and other units always remain to be reviewed. Consequently, desired comparisons of units for budgetary trade-offs are limited since detailed information may not be current or even available. Academic deans share both the

concerns of the unit and the total institution, and the utility of program reviews to them depend more on the nature of particular situations and the quality and relevance of a particular review.

Factors Promoting the Use of Program Reviews

The previous section discussed the uses of program review results by emphasizing the match between the products of program reviews and the information needs and issues of concern to users in the university. This section will discuss factors in the organizational environment that affect the use of program reviews. Important factors that are manageable include the credibility and perceived openness of the review process, internal communications, and functions of participants. Factors that are not manageable include the responsiveness of given units participating in a program review, the administrative climate in the university, and unforseen interventions such as a change in top administration. To the extent possible these factors should be identified during the needs assessment stage and considered as potentially important constraints during the design and implementation stages.

Credibility of the Process: Credibility is enhanced through the use of top quality people throughout the implementation of program reviews including a respected faculty member as an internal advocate and coordinator of the overall process, an advisory group of university constituents, and strong individuals as the chairperson of each of the program review teams. Credibility is also enhanced as the rationale for the program review process and subsequent recommendations are developed and applied consistently across several program reviews. This rationale for the program review process must reflect the academic norms present in the university and the needs for information.

Internal Communications: Attention to internal communcations is crucial. Several communications efforts are needed, and they must emphasize continuously the elements of fairness, equity, balance, candor, and flexibility that underlie any successful program review process. A commitment must be made to protecting the traditional academic norms of openness and consultation, and these lines of consultation must be maintained regardless of the often perceived low level of tangible benefits. The essential intangible benefits are the maintenance of credibility and constituent support.

Roles of Participants: Most program review processes involve many people functioning in several roles. The implementation of a program review process and the subsequent use of results can be enhanced if an effort is made to clarify the set of roles and functions for all participants and then refine the roles throughout the full cyle of program reviews. Results will more likely be used if there emerges commonly held views regarding the needs and purposes of the reviews, who are responsible for the design of the process and the conduct of the reviews, what groups and individuals will be consulted and the purposes of those consultations, the source and function of recommendations, the location of decision-making authority, and the agents responsible for subsequent actions.

Openness vs Confidentiality: Detailed program review involves a question of openness versus confidentiality. Some degree of confidentiality is essential in order to promote the expression of candid viewpoints, and the sources of candid views must be protected. However, the critical light of public view and the pressure of peers applied through an open process are

essential for precipitating changes. Futhermore, the review process must be sufficiently open so that the process design and the conduct of participants are seen to be consistent with the underlying rationale and perceived benefits. The ultimate question is one of balance in any given situation so that adequate information can be obtained for stimulating needed changes and enhancing unit strengths without inappropriately disrupting the activities of the unit.

Unit Responsiveness: The responsiveness of individual units to the program review process is seldom manageable, but typical unit reactions need to be understood in order to interpret the impact of a program review in the unit. Responsiveness, or resistance, is a complex issue. Experience indicates that the willingness to participate and the ability to participate productively should be viewed separately. Willingness can be influenced by anticipated benefits, for stronger units may be reluctant to expend effort if little return is anticipated. Key individuals such as deans, chairpersons, and program directors are influential is commiting a unit to participate.

Once a commitment to participate is made, then the ability to work productively within a review process is largely dependent on the strength of the unit. A department of generally high quality usually has active norms of self evaluation and improvement and are the most capable of executing a good self study. Stronger departments are usually well organized, have a confident self image, have a broad outlook regarding the nature of their activities in the university, and are generally responsive participants in the program review process. However, these departments benefit least from the program review given their high stature.

Weaker departments tend to be more resistive, feel more threatened by program reviews, tend to defend past accomplishments, display a fairly narrow attitude toward their activities in the university, and respond in a more adversarial manner. Departments of this nature stand the most to gain through program review activities and will do so if problems extent in the unit are not so devisive as to prevent collaboration for constructive change.

Administrative Climate: The administrative climate for supporting the program review process is not easily adjusted, but the environment must be sufficiently stable and supportive for the development and initial implementation of the process. Impacts have been observed to be greatest in those areas of the university where operations are more open and collaborative and reflect the consistent application of a set of rational principles. A program review process is most valuable for its ability to stimulate change in departments and programs, but if the factors that promote changes in specific areas are also observed and enhanced at other levels of the university, then over time changes may also be stimulated in schools/colleges and the central administrative areas as well.

Develop Realistic Expectations: No reference has been made in this paper to the literature that cites the generally limited use of program reviews and evaluation research. There have been several cases where University administrators have felt frustrated when the products and impacts of an extensive program review system do not meet expectations. Part of

this frustration can be ameliorated through greater attention to needs assessment and the design and implementation of the review system. But developing realistic expectations in the first place is also a key element of this frustration. Three recommendations are appropriate for developing realistic expectations:

1) Do not anticipate major changes resulting from program reviews. A system of program reviews can best be utilized to facilitate and occasionally precipitate those evolutionary changes that are already in the offing, and to build visibility and momentum for changes to come at some future time.

2) Anticipate continuous evolutionary changes in the program review system and be open to adjust to unforseen interventions and "windfall" benefits. As experience accumulates, what typically began as a comprehensive design to meet a broad range of needs will change as specific needs emerge as most important and time constraints for implementation limit the effort available. Interventions such as changes in key personnel and funding crises often change the directions of the initial design and implementation approach.

3) Broaden the definition of utilization of program reviews to include the "secondary" benefits of increased communications, clarification of existing goals and trends, tangible support for existing intuitions, incremental reduction in uncertainty in decision-making, and others. The immediate, direct, and concrete impact on program decisions is rare. The major contributions come in the longer term enhancement of the continuing operations of the university.

Footnotes

[1] A report is forthcoming by the author titled "Comparative Analysis of Selected Planning Activities in Five Research Universities."

[2] Needs assessment and the design and implementation of program review systems are discussed in two companion papers by Heydinger (1978) and Mims (1978).

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